


VI

# The Body, After All

## *(or, Uranian, Just in Case)*

*A reading of Elizabeth Duval's* After Trans *(VI): the final chapter and the epilogue*

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## *1. A right of reply*

Elizabeth Duval closes *Después de lo trans: sexo y género entre la izquierda y lo identitario* (*After Trans: Sex and Gender Between the Left and the Identitarian*, 2021) with a word to her interlocutors. She warns them that she has been harsh, severe even, and reminds them, by way of Hannah Arendt, that to think is to think critically and that to think critically is always to be hostile. Then she asks for something almost nobody in this debate asks for: that they regard her side of the argument as worth answering, and exercise their right of reply.[1] This is the sixth and final instalment of a chapter-by-chapter reading of that book, and it is, among other things, an acceptance of the invitation.

First, what is owed. Duval is a brilliant philosopher. She starts from premises I largely share, such as that nobody chooses their identity and that perception organises violence, and arrives at conclusions diametrically opposed to mine; which is precisely why she is worth reading. When she thinks something has been badly handled she says so, even when it comes from her own side, and she has none of the purism that in activist circles admits nothing at all. It helps, no doubt, that she never accepted the label of activist: "How can I be an activist when I don't do anything?"[2] From a liberal standpoint such as mine, to find someone who writes from within her own conceptual framework and opens the argument rather than closing it is a sign that free thought still has room to breathe. Her epilogue makes the point in political terms: a punitive left will have no defence on the day it is governed by those who always wanted to punish.[3]

Not every author extends that courtesy. Talia Mae Bettcher, another rigorous trans philosopher who must be read carefully if one hopes to answer her, states in *Beyond Personhood* that her work is addressed to trans people, nonbinary people and friends, and that she does not believe in wasting her breath on transphobes.[4] Duval writes for those who will contradict her as well. I regret that she has turned her back on the exposure that once made her the face of a movement (she grew tired, she says, of activist Twitter, and has no wish whatever to repeat that wave of publicity)[5], because one needs interlocutors with whom one can disagree and still go on talking. The same standard applies on the other side. I share many of the conclusions of gender-critical feminism and dissent from the method and tone of a good many of its philosophers. Nobody should be marked for ever by one unfortunate remark, as though carrying an original sin with no baptism to wash it away, and Duval writes like someone who understands this.

A confession before the objections: watching her make mincemeat of Paul B. Preciado in her fifth chapter gave me a pleasure that in another context one would have to call orgasmic.[6] What follows are philosophical disagreements, and none of them is personal.

## *2. The ebb tide, seen from inside*

The final chapter opens with a reckoning. In 2015 trans people enjoyed unprecedented media exposure in Spain, centred on minors and their families, and Duval, then a teenager, was one of its faces. Five years later she observes an ebb and asks why the movement is in retreat when its institutional gains are so tangible. Her answer is organisational. The media figures are gone, solid associations are lacking, and uniting trans women, trans men and nonbinary people across differences of class and

generation strikes her as "practically impossible".[7] She adds that the demonstrations were never mostly led by trans people at all, but by transfeminist assemblies descended from queer theory: "a most entertaining variable geometry".[8] Her conclusion: "the trans collective does not exist".[9]

I share the diagnosis and would add a cause that is easier to see from inside the broader community. The LGBT movement became dogmatic, and when it ceased to be LGBT and began adding letters without end it turned into an open call for anyone who felt oppressed. Something broke, and an attempt was made to mend it with superglue. If a person who in theory belongs to the community no longer feels held by it, something has gone wrong, and when I say a person, I mean myself. The redefinition of what it means to be gay or lesbian leaves many of us with a sense of erasure, and since we are mostly men and mostly white, the complaint is dismissed as yet another patriarchal male whingeing about lost privilege.

Gay used to mean a man sexually attracted to men. Activist usage has slid it from "same sex" to "same gender", and with that slide the word stopped naming my experience. I am not attracted to a female body however much beard and muscle it may sport, and to claim that a gay man may desire someone with a vagina, or a lesbian someone with a penis, contradicts the most elementary sense of what those words used to name. On this point Duval has already conceded my case: in her second chapter she writes that it is futile to ask lesbians to deconstruct their rejection of penises.[10] What she grants them holds for us.

Hence, as a political provocation and in the name of unconditional respect for self-perception, I announce my new identity: I am a Uranian. The term was coined by Karl Heinrich Ulrichs in 1864, and his formula was *anima muliebris virili corpore inclusa*, a woman's soul confined in a man's body.[11] I know perfectly well what it meant, and it is exactly the "gender neoplatonism" Duval denounces in her first chapter and again in this one.[12] Since the queer movement has stripped my category of its meaning, I have helped myself to a relic from its prehistory and intend to keep it. Nobody may dispute it without disputing self-perception, and I shall allow nobody to colonise it. Should anyone ask my sexual orientation, the answer is Uranian.

### *3. The children swept away by the tide*

Duval calls the strategy of centring the movement on minors and their families "short-sighted and sterile".[13] Once the reforms were won the whole thing switched off, leaving without any structure the generations of trans women driven onto the street and into prostitution. She is right. As a physician I would add that the strategy was also mistaken, for a reason she does not mention: the specificity of children with genuine dysphoria was dissolved in a tide of childhood self-identifications.

The DSM-5 criteria for gender dysphoria in children already included stereotyped markers, such as a preference for the clothes, toys or playmates of the other sex. But they required, as an indispensable condition, a strong desire to be of the other sex, or an insistence that one is, sustained for at least six months.[14] Once social transition comes to rest on declaration and on adults' reading of the child, that condition slackens and the stereotypes are left to do the work on their own. The earlier clinical literature recorded, moreover, that a good many dysphoric children whose dysphoria did not persist grew up to be homosexual.[15] The tide carries away the trans children and the future gay men and lesbians with them, children who once were simply the ones who did not fit.

The danger cuts both ways. Children with real dysphoria are submerged in a far larger population, and the backlash against that population threatens to sweep away the specific medical care they need. Duval was writing in 2020. Four years later the independent review of gender identity services for children and young people in England, the Cass Review, set out how weak the evidence was for much of what had been done.[16] The cost of diluting the category will be borne by those who needed it.

### *4. The codes loosen, and tighten again*

The chapter's social thesis is that the proliferation of trans subjectivities expresses a loosening of the codes of gender, which come apart "from certain notions of genitality".[17] What happened to children shows the other half of the story: the codes loosened in one place and tightened in another. Feminism and the old gay movement spent decades dismantling roles and stereotypes so that a boy might play with dolls without its saying anything about what he was. Those same stereotypes now return as a sign that a trans child may be present. The code came untied from the genitals only to be tied again to clothes and toys, and for those of us who fought for gender nonconformity that is a step backwards.

### *5. Two patients in the waiting room*

At the centre of the chapter stands a thought experiment. Two people identical in appearance and in how they are perceived, differing only in their genitals: are they to be told apart by the labels "trans" and "cis"? If so, Duval replies, let us admit the hypocrisy: we are talking about what someone has between their legs and, accordingly, judging them "abnormal, perverse or monstrous".[18] And she presses further: if two bodies are perceived in exactly the same way, what justifies giving them two labels on the basis of genitals or chromosomes the observer can only imagine?[19] The question deserves an answer, and I offer one with every respect.

To begin with, the premise describes perception at a distance, and the book itself shows that perception gets corrected. The lesbian of the second chapter loses her desire on discovering a penis where her schema had supposed a vulva. And Duval writes that a body's past is read in intimacy, "in the braille we find on another's skin".[20] Two bodies identical to the eye are not identical, and the book proves as much on its own account.

Then there is the waiting room. I am a doctor, and two identical patients sitting side by side do not receive the same care: one is due a prostate check, the other a cervical smear. Medicine does not classify by appearance, because it is the body that falls ill. There lies the justification Duval asks for in distinguishing by genitals, and it contains no moral judgement whatever. To distinguish the seahorse from the mare condemns neither of them. The leap from "we distinguish" to "we judge monstrous" is hers, and in making it she moralises the very genitals she accuses everyone else of moralising.

That leaves the label. Her experiment needs two, "trans" and "cis", and I use only one. I do not use the term "cis", and I reject it outright: it adds no precision whatever about people who are not trans and presupposes precisely what is in question here, that there is an identity and a sex which happen to coincide, as though one needed a word for a thing's coincidence with itself. One of the two people in the experiment I call a woman. The other I call a trans woman, knowing that the adjective names a real passage, the very one Duval places at the heart of her thesis.

### *6. The movement and the political decision*

The book's final thesis I accept: trans constitutes neither a category of identification nor a position within the gender system, and functions as "the signifier of a movement within that same system and towards the system".[21] I also accept the reasons for which, on Duval's account, one is trans in the present. One is trans because one is in a transition not yet finished, because the transition cannot be hidden, or by the political decision to claim the label even when one could pass unnoticed. That last reason is the real problem, and it is worth saying why.

The other two are bound to a body, one that is changing or one that cannot disguise the change. The political decision detaches the category from any incongruence and any change, and then anyone may come in. Through that door walks the bearded, hairy-chested fellow who has altered nothing and declares himself a trans woman. I do not accept him, and I find him an insult to the trans women I knew in the days when I spent my nights in the company of *travestis*, women who paid with their bodies for what he spares himself with a sentence. Duval does accept him, but she gives the thing its exact name. In the previous chapter she grants that no change of behaviour or appearance may be required ("and why would we not buy that?") and draws the consequence: trans would then become "a merely enunciative reality, which comes into being only through a speech act".[22] What she describes with perfect composure is precisely what I reject, a category that exists for as long as someone is pronouncing it.

The nonbinary, according to Duval, springs from that same political decision, and she marks its limit with precision. A nonbinary person can be read as such only by saying so, and even then what they obtain is a correction of the first perception, which leaves untouched the sexual schema the observer presupposes.[23] What we have there is a predicate laid over a body that has already been perceived, and the subject deserves an essay of its own.

### *7. The right to pass*

Duval reads the wish to pass unnoticed as a product. Liberal democracies, she says, want citizens who conform to the norms of gender and of beauty. Hence the insistence on transitioning as early as possible, so that the marks of male puberty will not show, and hence the use of nonconforming trans bodies as propaganda, so that everyone else may feel at one with their gender and find no reason to rebel. Many trans people, she observes, want being trans to remain a "having been".[24]

That they want it seems to me reason enough to respect it. If someone wishes to assimilate and to live without their history following them to every counter, nobody has the right to conscript that wish into a cause. And if their standards of beauty are those of their time, they cannot be required to change them single-handed. Those standards belong to the whole mass, the *massa damnata*, as St Augustine of Hippo called fallen humanity, which is all of us together.[25] The mass does change, but on a schedule that is not that of a single life, and what changes slowly cannot be forced.

There is a phenomenological reason as well. What is predicated can be modified, a name or a document. Sometimes it works and sometimes it fails, and it fails because beneath it lies an antepredicative experience that resists: that of the body presenting itself before me before I have said a word about it. That is not dismissed by argument. In her epilogue Duval prefers to think of capitalism as a metabolism rather than an intention,[26] and assimilation can be read with the same instrument. Liberal

democracies are not conspiring to manufacture conforming citizens; people want a quiet life, and the mass is slow to change. Respecting that wish alters nothing I have argued about sex. It is courtesy, defended as the other person's right.

### *8. What remains*

Duval does not wish to invalidate Judith Butler or Preciado, who made the nonbinary into the promise of a future without gender.[27] I do, at every opportunity, and what I invalidate are their theories, not their persons. Preciado, moreover, I do not count as a thinker at all. He is an artist, and Duval herself hands me the key: in her fifth chapter she proposes reading the *Countersexual Manifesto* "as a queer aesthetic work".[28] I accept the proposal and present the bill. If it is an aesthetic work, let art criticism judge it and leave political theory alone. Art and philosophy may share a house, provided neither passes itself off as the other, for disciplines do not transition.

For any workable politics, what remains is to tell one's opponents apart. Religious groups with genuine prejudice, whether Christian or Muslim, are one thing; the far right is another. Gender-critical feminists are a third, and with them a reconciliation is still possible if we stop trying to colonise other people's opinions and their freedom to voice them. Duval files them all under "trans-exclusionary"; I do not. At present each side is the other's straw man, and when you set fire to straw all you get is a blaze, and a bigger one.

It remains to answer the question with which Duval closes her chapter: "And what will be left to us, after trans, who once were it and never wished to be it again?"[29] She writes that we shall see the end of human civilisation before the end of gender, and that gender will never become a dead language.[30] I agree, and I think I know why. Over the course of the book Duval dismissed the will and showed that the gaze can be mistaken, until she concluded that trans is an adjectival modifier and never an entity in itself. But an adjective needs a noun, and the noun was there all along, in the braille of the skin and in the "inability to gestate" she names when she looks for what she shares with other trans women.[31] In her second chapter she wrote that "the body is what is objective";[32] she stopped short of calling it sex. After trans, and after all, the body remains. And I, just in case, am a Uranian.

## Notes

1. Elizabeth Duval, *Después de lo trans: sexo y género entre la izquierda y lo identitario*, La Caja Books, 2021 (ebook, ISBN 978-84-17496-50-0), "Agradecimientos", where she quotes Hannah Arendt. The ebook has no fixed pagination, so references are to chapter and section, and the author's marginal notes are cited by their letter. All translations from Duval are my own.
2. Duval, "Prolegómenos".
3. Duval, "Epílogo: una propuesta político-moral".
4. Talia Mae Bettcher, *Beyond Personhood: An Essay in Trans Philosophy*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2025, ch. "Getting 'Real'", p. 12.
5. Duval, "Prolegómenos" and ch. 7, section "Los flujos de lo trans".
6. Duval, ch. 5, "Nadie sabe lo que puede un ano emancipador: disputaciones con Paul B. Preciado".
7. Duval, ch. 7, section "Los flujos de lo trans".
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. Duval, ch. 2, "La percepción en la violencia y el deseo".

11. Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, *Inclusa* (1864), in *Forschungen über das Räthsel der mannmännlichen Liebe*.
12. Duval, ch. 1, "Breve historia de lo trans", and ch. 7, section "Los flujos de lo trans".
13. Duval, ch. 7, section "Los flujos de lo trans", and note [u] to ch. 7.
14. American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 5th ed. (DSM-5), Washington DC, 2013, "Gender Dysphoria in Children".
15. Madeleine S. C. Wallien and Peggy T. Cohen-Kettenis, "Psychosexual outcome of gender-dysphoric children", *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 47 (12), 2008, pp. 1413–1423.
16. Hilary Cass, *Independent Review of Gender Identity Services for Children and Young People: Final Report*, London, April 2024.
17. Duval, ch. 7, "Después de lo trans".
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid.
20. Duval, ch. 5, "De la legitimidad de las zonas temporalmente autónomas en Urano".
21. Duval, ch. 7, "Después de lo trans".
22. Duval, ch. 6, "Escenas de guerra partidista".
23. Duval, ch. 7, "Después de lo trans".
24. Ibid.
25. St Augustine of Hippo, *The City of God*, XXI, 12.
26. Duval, "Epílogo: una propuesta político-moral".
27. Duval, ch. 7, "Después de lo trans".
28. Duval, ch. 5, "Manifiesto contra el *Manifiesto contrasexual*".
29. Duval, ch. 7, "Después de lo trans".
30. Ibid.
31. Duval, ch. 4, "Teología trans: el evangelio de la Veneno según Valeria Vegas (y los Javis)", fragment 6.
32. Duval, ch. 2, "El género como sistema y el género como proceso".